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Written by  
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**Guest Opinion**

Last session, when the Iowa Legislature passed Senate File 2315 and mandated the redesign of Iowa's mental health and disability service system, it was the result of an inclusive, bipartisan process where legislators worked in good faith to address problems in Iowa's underfunded service system that could no longer be ignored.

For too long, the supports and services an individual receives have depended too much on where he or she lives. It is increasingly difficult for many counties to provide the full range of services individuals might need to live successfully in the community.

Moreover, the system has been overly reliant on high-cost settings to deliver services that typically do not provide sufficient opportunities for full community participation.

In my opinion, the Legislature took important steps to improve the system by creating a regional framework intended to increase Iowans' access to services that will still be delivered locally.

The Legislature understood, however, that SF 2315 was only the beginning. Lawmakers called for the establishment of another round of committees and workgroups to help the Department of Human Services with the enormous task of implementing the new law.

A Transition Committee, for example, is charged to ensure the transition from the current mental health and disability system to the regional system is as seamless as possible for all concerned. The Outcomes and Performance Measures Committee is charged to develop recommendations for a set of standard outcome and performance measures to be used to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the new system.

The Iowa Department of Public Health is charged to create a Workforce Work Group to find ways to make sure there is an adequate and well-trained workforce available to deliver required core services and also to review training/certification requirements.

The Mental Health and Disability Services Commission continues its current role of advising DHS on administrative rules. Information about these groups, and other aspects of redesign, are available the DHS's Redesign website:

<http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/Partners/MHDSRedesign.html>

Changes intended to improve service systems are always hard — especially when the issues are complex and stakes are so high for individuals' lives.

That's why it is so important for stakeholders — individuals with disabilities, family members, providers, local officials, advocates and other community members — to take advantage of available opportunities for public input as implementation of redesign proceeds.

All of the workgroups identified above are public meetings that include at least one opportunity for public comment. The membership of the workgroups, with contact information, is also available on the DHS Redesign website. DHS officials, legislators and other workgroup members understand and appreciate the need to hear from people most affected by the system in order to get things right.

In addition to taking advantage of opportunities to provide input into workgroup deliberations and administrative rules, it is important for advocates to keep legislators informed about the need for adequate funding of the system going forward.

This is particularly important because there will be many new faces in the Legislature next year. (There are 23 legislators retiring and there are 31 open seats where no incumbent is running.)

In the short term, it is critically important that the Legislature make an appropriation to the Transition Fund established in SF2315 (but not yet funded) as early as possible in the 2013 session. The Legislature chose not to make an appropriation to the fund last year because lawmakers wanted counties to analyze very carefully what their potential Fiscal Year 2013 shortfall might be.

Counties must submit their applications to DHS by Nov. 1, so DHS can submit an overall recommendation for an appropriate amount of funding to the governor and legislature by Dec. 1.

Although \$20 million was tentatively earmarked last year for the Fund, the 2013 legislature must still authorize an appropriation.

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